

THE LEVEL OF THE YAROSLAVL FORUM WAS RATHER HIGH

Immanuel Wallerstein

YAROSLAVL 2010: IMPRESSIONS OF THE PARTICIPANTS



IMMANUEL WALLERSTEIN, born in 1933, is an American social scientist, historical scientist, and one of the most outstanding world-systems analysts.

He is a professor at Yale University and was the former head of the Fernand Braudel Center at Binghamton University. During the 2010 Global Policy Forum, «Modern State: Standards of Democracy and Criteria of Efficiency» held in Yaroslavl, he was a co-moderator of the section, «Standards of Democracy and the Variety of Democratic Experiences.»

RJ Dear Mr. Wallerstein, you participated in the debates on democracy. Were they instructive? Do we have any consensus on what is democracy?

People have very different definitions of it and therefore, they have very different appreciations of the degree to which it exists in their own country, in other countries, across the world, etc. And there is massive confusion and lack of clarity on the subject. **That's one of the major intellectual problems of the modern era.**

RJ Did the discussion manage to settle this lack of clarity?

No, not at all, not at all. It has rather illustrated it; it didn't settle it. Some people said interesting things, intelligent things about the situation, but, certainly, there was no resolution in the debate.

RJ So, actually we have an endless debate about democracy?

Endless debate whether there is a clear definition and single meaning to the term, and endless debate about the reality. Are certain countries democratic? By what definition? And so on.

RJ How would you appreciate the level of Russian debate? Did they seem representative?

One of the interesting things is that at least 50% of the audience was Russian. And there was obviously a conscious attempt to have representatives of political parties other than the current governing political party present. There were at least three, I believe — from 'Yabloko', from Zhirinovskiy's party, and from 'Pravoye Delo.' So, in that sense, there was an open presentation of a variety of political views within the political scene. That's certainly a good thing. And it was illuminating to hear why the

RJ And what about the intellectual level of the discussion?

The intellectual level was, by and large, quite high. Not everybody was at the highest level, but, by and large, it was quite good. The thing is that some people were more insightful and reflective than others. That's all, but that's normal. In any kind of quasi-political structure such as this one, really, you have a range of people with different capabilities. Actually, the level was higher than you would usually get at meetings of this kind, so that's a good thing.

RJ You visited the forum last year. Did you see any changes?

I think the Russian organisation of the forum was much more efficient this year than it was last year. They obviously learned from some of the organisational mistakes that they made the first time around, so that speaks well for bureaucratic efficiency. Perhaps they paid more attention to the range of Russian political parties. There was a large amount of non-Russian participation. It was large, though a little skimpy, I would say, on what I call the Global South. Basically, the non-Russians were from Western Europe, North America, Japan, China, Korea, and one or two other places, but not too many.

I assume the President of Russia chose to discuss the topic of democracy in part because the question of the degree to which Russia is a democratic country today has been a subject of much discussion in the United States and Western Europe

three opposition parties still believed Russia was not democratic and to hear the representative of the Russian official party say why it was.

If you really want to be global, you'd better get a lot of Latin Americans, a lot of Africans, a lot of people from the Muslim world, and a lot of people from Southeast Asia.

They weren't there, and they should be. Otherwise, we have only a partial expression of world opinion, a group dominated by what is called the 'North' to the exclusion of what is called the 'South.'

RJ *Why do You think the President of Russia chose the topic of democracy and its standards as a major one for this Forum?*

I assume the President did that in part **because the question of the degree to which Russia is a democratic country today has been a subject of much discussion in the United States and Western Europe.**

RJ *Was the topic of democratic standards revealing enough in the speeches of Dmitry Medvedev and other participants?*

The issue was directly addressed by the President and extensively discussed both in the section devoted to it and in the special meeting the President had with some 20 persons present at the conference. The whole range of views on this subject was represented at the conference.

RJ *How did the Global Policy Forum in Yaroslavl match the Russian and global political context? Has it become a noticeable event in global policy? Do you think that Western science and Western experts have become a factor for Russian policy?*

It is certainly clear that **Western views have become a factor that influences Russian politics.** But so are views from other parts of the world. Russia is still in an internal debate about how it should shape its institutions and its politics.

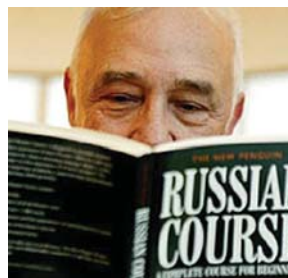
RJ *How would you appreciate Dmitry Medvedev's modernization policy as a whole? Which problems seem the hottest for the Russian President right now? Will he manage to maintain the course towards non-violent modernization in Russia while managing these problems?*

It is difficult for me to answer this question, since I am always unsure as to what 'modernization' as a term is supposed to refer. Are we talking about a growth in production and productivity? Are we talking about greater participation by the majority of the people in governmental decision-making? Are we talking about the protection of the rights of various kinds of minorities? Are we talking about a saner conservation and improvement of the environment? Are we talking about limiting the casual use of violence at a local level? Are we talking about truly greater equality and access to human resources?

These are questions not only for Russia but also for the United States, for the global South and for everyone. ■

Immanuel Wallerstein was speaking with Julia Netesova, Dnirty Uzlaner, and Alexander Pavlov

RUSSIA DEBATES ITS FUTURE



ROBERT SKIDELSKY, BARON AND LIFE PEER OF ENGLAND, is a renowned historian and economist, and head of the Global Research Center think tank. He is also a professor of political economy at Warwick University, a lecturer of history at Oxford University, and a member of the British Academy.

Robert Skidelsky recently participated in the 2010 Global Policy Forum in Yaroslavl

It is often said that Russia lacks a 'civil society.' But what it may lack in this regard it makes up for in possessing a rather interesting public sphere, in which serious topics do get debated, and glimpses of the great members of society are not entirely confined to televised snippets.

As a recent example, this year the Global Political Forum culminated in a symposium with President Dmitry Medvedev. Together with the president, scholars, analysts, and journalists (both Russian and foreign) joined political and business leaders in Yaroslavl to discuss Russia's future.

This event is markedly different from those usually held in Russia: **President Medvedev was willing to publicly engage with experts on their own intellectual turf.** The only recent Western political leader who had the confidence to do this was Bill Clinton.

At the Yaroslavl meeting with Medvedev, attention shifted to the connection between democracy and modernization. At present,

there are two broad views about the relationship between political and economic modernization.

Putin's view maintains that democracy results from a modern economy, a kind of reward for hard work. If the state pushes modernization from the top, democracy will grow naturally, albeit slowly, owing to a rise in overall prosperity and a growing middle class.

However, the Kremlin's chief ideologist, Vladislav Surkov, has suggested that a full fledged democracy presupposes a 'democracy in the head,' and that this desirable psychological condition is still a long way off in Russia.

The alternative view, championed by people such as the head of the Institute for Contemporary Development, Igor Yurgens, who is also close to the Kremlin, is that democracy is the precondition for economic modernization.

The debate is ongoing, and whichever opinion prevails will no doubt determine the future of Russia's development and modernization. ■